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ABSTRACT

Feedback provides information that lets people know how they are doing. When they are monitoring their everyday work, it lets them know how they measure up. When they are setting development goals, it reinforces changes they are making. Many people know they need feedback, but are unsure how to get it. Three things must be considered: whom to ask, when to ask, and how to ask. Feedback should be asked of an honest, credible, and respected person who will encourage the asker to improve effectiveness. It should be someone with a different work style (a boss, colleague, friend, or adviser) who can observe the asker's behavior, show interest in his/her effectiveness, and communicate directly, honestly, and specifically. Requestors should ask for daily feedback after they have determined their development goals. The more often they get feedback, the sooner they can pursue their goals. The quality and quantity of information received depends on how one asks for it. This booklet recommends the Situation-Behavior-Impact model to elicit relevant, forthcoming feedback. Receivers should evaluate feedback accuracy, value, and importance; thank donors; and be able to explain politely why they may not act on particular suggestions. Contains a checklist and seven references. (MLH)

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IDEAS INTO ACTION GUIDEBOOKS

FOR THE PRACTICING MANAGER

Ongoing Feedback

How to Get It, How to Use It

Karen Kirkland and Sam Manoogian

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AN IDEAS INTO ACTION GUIDEBOOK

Ongoing Feedback

How to Get It, How to Use It

Ideas Into Action Guidebooks

Aimed at managers and executives who are concerned with their own and others' development, each guidebook in this series gives specific advice on how to complete a developmental task or solve a leadership problem.

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Ongoing Feedback

How to Get It, How to Use It

Karen Kirkland and Sam Manoogian

Center for Creative Leadership

From the Series Editor

"Ideas into action" is a phrase that guided the establishment of the Center for Creative Leadership in 1970, and it has been the touchstone for its work in subsequent years. It expresses very succinctly the principle that if managers and executives are provided with the best thinking on leadership in a straightforward, accessible form, they are much more likely to become effective leaders.

This series of guidebooks is a special embodiment of the phrase. With respect to "ideas," the series draws on the practical knowledge of CCL, generated in the course of thirty years of research and educational activity conducted in partnership with literally hundreds of thousands of managers and executives. Much of this knowledge is shared—in a way that is distinct from the typical university department, professional association, or consultant organization. CCL is not essentially a collection of individual experts, although the individual credentials of its staff are impressive; rather it is a community, with its members holding certain principles in common and working together to understand and generate practical responses to today's leadership and organizational challenges.

With respect to "into action," the purpose of the series is to provide the practicing manager with specific advice on how to complete a developmental task or solve a leadership problem. In other words, these guidebooks will facilitate your ability to act.

The series is thus one of the ways that CCL carries out its mission of advancing the understanding, practice, and development of leadership for the benefit of society worldwide. We think that you will find the Ideas Into Action Guidebooks an important addition to your leadership toolkit.

Russ S. Moxley

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Background

WHO IS THIS GUIDEBOOK FOR?

If you are a manager who has just completed a leadership development experience, such as attending a program or receiving feedback from a 360-degree instrument, or have just experienced a career transition, such as a promotion or a lateral move to a more challenging position, this guidebook can help.

You now realize that it is necessary to develop some new skills, use skills that haven't yet been tested, or hone current skills and abilities. Such skill work requires ongoing feedback from others to help track progress and give an indication of how much more needs to be done.

How to Get Feedback

Feedback provides information that lets you know how you are doing. If you are monitoring your everyday work, it lets you know how you measure up. If you have set a development goal for yourself, it reinforces the changes you are making, boosts self-confidence, and encourages you to continue. If you are in a new job, it lets you know whether you are learning the new skills that are required. If you have experienced a career setback, it gives you information that helps you evaluate the situation.

Many people know that they need feedback but are unsure about how to get it. Three things must be considered: who to ask, when to ask, and how to ask.

Who to Ask for It

1. It should be a person whose opinion you respect and who will encourage you to improve your effectiveness, someone with credibility and integrity. When you think of him or her, you should be able to say to yourself, "This is someone I trust to be honest with me, who does not have a hidden agenda, and who treats me with respect."

   To identify these individuals, look among your peers at work but also look to your friends outside of work, your family members—children included—and anyone with whom you have contact in a charitable, professional, or community organization.

2. It should be someone who has a different work style and whose feedback will provide opinions and points of view that are new. To ask for this kind of feedback, you will have to move outside your comfort zone.

   To identify these people, look among your peers and direct reports, and particularly look for a person with whom you've had a disagreement in the past. Or you can look for someone who has at some point baffled you by the way he or she thinks and acts. Perhaps their way can be more effective than yours in certain circumstances. You need perspectives other than the one to which you have grown accustomed.

3. It should be someone with whom you must interact in order for you both to be successful. This is a relationship where each of you has a vested interest in making the other person work more effectively.

   To identify these people, look to your boss, your customers, your suppliers, and your direct reports. In fact, look to anyone who is part of a team with you, either inside or outside work. Are you part of an athletic team? Are you part of a planning committee for the PTA or a charity? Look to your spouse or significant other—the two of you are part of a team as well.

4. It should be someone with whom you have worked long enough to have had opportunities to observe you in a variety of settings. This usually means at least six months.

   To identify these people, think about those peers, direct reports, or bosses with whom you have worked over time. You might find that someone you worked with in the recent past would be more helpful than someone you have just begun to work with.

Overall, you need people who:

- Are able to observe your behavior.
- Have an interest in your effectiveness.
- Are able to speak to you directly, honestly, and specifically.

Here are some potential sources of feedback, people you may run across every day:

- Boss, peers, direct reports, colleagues in other departments.
- Spouse, children.
- Parents, brothers and sisters, extended family members.
- Friends, college friends.
- Members of committees or organizations outside of work (professional colleagues, fellow volunteers, church members, neighbors).
- Minister, doctor, financial advisor.
- Customers, suppliers.

Use this list plus any others you might think of, and take a few moments to consider whom you might ask. Remember, don't limit yourself to work situations. Think about all the activities in your life.

Write down the names of these people. List as many as you can.

Is there anyone you shouldn't seek feedback from? Yes. There are some risks involved in seeking feedback. For example, if you work in an organization with peers who compete for the same bonus money, then those individuals may not be good people to ask for feedback. They won't necessarily have your effectiveness or your best interests in mind.

There may be others with whom you would choose not to be vulnerable. It may be that you see them as too judgmental, or as unable to keep confidences, or as poor observers of behavior.

When to Ask for It

1. Ask after you have identified your development goals. Having a clear idea of your goals, of course, is of primary importance. You will find it much more difficult to ask for feedback if your goals are unfocused and diffuse. You may also find yourself using up your co-workers' goodwill because you are not clear about what you want. So this may be a good place to look at how you can focus on your goals to make feedback requests clear.

   If you have just undergone a developmental experience, such as a performance appraisal, an executive development program, or an assessment by means of a 360-degree instrument, you should have a good idea of what your goals are. If you have just gone through a career transition, or have been faced with new challenges in your present job, you should also have fresh ideas on new skills and perspectives you want and need to develop.

   Which one are you going to try first? Pick one—one that you want to work on immediately and that will yield a payoff for you and the organization. A significant goal will require a change in your behavior, and changing your behavior is *hard work*. Start with just one goal; you'll find, as with anything, it's easiest to fulfill the process by concentrating on one thing at a time.

Which one? That you need to create more effective work teams? That you must be less abrasive with people? That you need to work on being more strategic?

Select one goal that you want to focus upon and get feedback on. Write it down, in as much detail as possible.

Compare the goal you have just written with one that Jan, a senior-level manager at a manufacturing company, has set for herself. Jan has recently returned from a development program where she received feedback that she needs to work on her ability to create successful work teams. Here is the goal Jan wants to achieve in the next six months:

"I will improve my effectiveness in leading a work team by concentrating on the following two goals. I will learn to reserve judgment on others' ideas by making sure that my initial response is not a negative one. Additionally, I will ask for input from the group before decisions are made. I will ask one of my peers, Derrick, who is involved in at least two teams with me, to give me feedback and help me monitor my progress. I will achieve these goals by August 1 —six months from now."

2. Ask daily. The more often you receive feedback, the more often you can put your goals into action. Any change you make in your behavior needs to be woven into the fabric of your daily routine.

There are times you won't have to ask. The more you seek feedback, the more likely people will come to you with their perceptions. If you can afford to take the time, listen to them carefully. If you cannot afford the time at that moment, set a brief appointment with them for later.

How to Ask for It

Asking for feedback is one of the most difficult tasks in the feedback process. Much of the quality and quantity of the information that you receive is dependent upon how you ask for it. We recommend that you use the *Situation-Behavior-Impact* model or *SBI model* to elicit relevant and forthcoming feedback from the people you ask.

The SBI model gives other people a framework for structuring their information and perceptions of you. It provides a way for you to get feedback that is specific and helpful and a safe way for others to give it. It breaks down the perception of your performance into three areas: describing the *situation* and your *behavior*, and then the *impact* that your behavior has had on the other people in the room.

Situation. Where and when did the specific behavior occur? *("In our staff meeting this morning"; "when we were meeting with Andrea.")*

Behavior. What are the characteristics, observable actions, verbal and nonverbal behaviors that need to be changed or improved? *("You criticized Andrea's idea before it was explained, and revealed through your body language that you didn't think much of it.")*

Impact. What are the consequences of the behavior? What impact does the behavior have on other people? What might they think or feel? Is the behavior effective? Is it ineffective? *("Andrea's idea had possible merit and you didn't hear it through. Your behavior also inhibited the other people there.")*

Let's look at how this model can work for you. You've just returned from a development program with the goal of becoming better focused in your communication with others. At the program you received the results of a 360-degree-feedback instrument, and

Rachel, one of your peers, filled out your 360 form. She's also someone from whom you want to get additional feedback. This is how you should start talking to Rachel about your feedback:

"Rachel, I want to say thanks for taking the time to fill out my 360-degree questionnaire. I've been away this week at the leadership development program, and I've really learned a lot about my work style and my needs for improvement. That wouldn't have happened without your help.

"We have the monthly capital budget meeting this afternoon, which I know you're scheduled to attend. I'll be talking about cutting costs in the distribution center, and I'd like you to observe me if that's possible. I want to improve my communication skills; specifically, to make my points clearly and not drift off the subject. Could you observe me and then speak with me afterwards about how I did?"

Rachel agrees, and after the meeting, you catch up with her in her office. Here's how you should ask for the feedback, using the SBI model:

Situation. Ask Rachel to *briefly describe the situation and setting where the behavior occurred.* The purpose of this is to refresh her memory, to get her to think back to the situation.

Behavior. Encourage Rachel to *include as many details as she can.* Ask her if she can remember not only what you did or said but also how you said it or did it. If she can provide you with feedback on your nonverbal behavior, then you've received some excellent feedback. And remember to tell her that you just want her to describe it, that you're not asking her to judge it. Encourage her to be candid.

Impact. Ask her *how she felt about what you did.* Tell her that you'd like a personal statement that conveys to you, *"This is what I felt, and this was the impact on me as a peer and also as a fellow human being."*

This is what you want to hear from Rachel about your behavior:

"I think you know the situation. The meeting was focused on cutting costs in the distribution process. You had thirty minutes for your presentation. **(Situation)**

"You started off talking about standard operating procedures that, if followed, could save the company money. But then you switched gears and started talking about hiring a new vice president of manufacturing. You talked about this for almost ten minutes. Very close to the end of your time you brought up the new technology for packaging and how it could save us money. **(Behavior)**

"At first I was really interested. And others were, too. Michael was even taking notes. But when you started talking about hiring the vice president I got bored—we've talked about that a lot—and I noticed others started fidgeting. Several even left the room to get coffee. I got interested again when you brought up the new packaging technology. It was on topic and you presented the information in an exciting way." **(Impact)**

Remember these Do's and Don'ts when using the SBI model:

Do

- Explain how you would like to receive your feedback—in the SBI model. Try to say, *"Rachel, can you picture that event in your mind, describe where we were, what I did, and how you felt about it?"*
- Let the person finish what he or she is saying.
- Try to paraphrase, either back to the person or in your own mind, what you are being told. Use the SBI format to do this. Remember that people are not used to being so candid—take it slowly.
- Ask clarifying questions.
- Ask for specifics, if not provided.
- Ask the person to give you alternatives to your behavior.
- Pay attention to your nonverbal responses.
- Respect those who do not wish to give you feedback.
- Thank the person for being helpful to you.

Don't

- Become defensive or explain your behavior. (You can either spend your time mobilizing your defenses or you can spend your time listening. Defending your actions is counterproductive, whereas listening is extremely useful.)
- Interrupt the other person. You asked for the feedback, now listen to it.
- Be afraid to allow pauses and periods of silence when you receive feedback—if you were sincere about your request, people will take the time to think about what they say.
- Ask the person to defend his or her opinion (there is a difference between "defending" and "explaining"). Feedback is purely subjective perceptions and information. You can place your own value on it later.
- Seek feedback from your fan club only.

How to Use It

Anytime you receive feedback from someone, even someone who has given you relevant feedback in the past, take a minute or two after the interaction to evaluate the content. Only you can make a judgment as to the relevance of any information you receive.

Make Sure You Evaluate It

Not all feedback is useful in making your behavior more effective, and only you can determine to what extent you want to act on other people's perceptions. Sometimes low-impact feedback (low-information content) comes from usually reliable and consistent sources. Sometimes high-impact feedback comes from surprising sources, inconsistent sources, or even unreliable sources. Use the following framework, which we call the *self-management model of feedback*, to evaluate what you are told.

Accuracy. Who is giving you this feedback? What are their intentions, and how much do you respect their opinion?

Value. Do you like this feedback or not? Is this something that can be helpful to you? Do you want to know more?

Importance. What are you going to do about it? Anything? Not all feedback can or should be acted upon. On the other hand, some feedback cannot be ignored.

If you are not sure about the accuracy, value, and importance of the feedback, you might want to check it out with a trusted colleague or friend before deciding to discard it.

Do These Things If You Decide Not to Use It

- Remember to thank the person for giving you feedback—you want to make sure that you continue to receive other feedback in the future, even if you are not going to act on this particular information.

- If it is an ongoing relationship, then you should tell that person that you don't intend to change the behavior. It is helpful to explain the reasons (if the other person is interested). Be direct, brief, and polite.

- Be prepared for additional feedback from that person. He or she may say, *"I've mentioned four times that your being late to meetings is a problem for me. I feel irritated and frustrated. This pattern suggests to me that you are not concerned about our project or my feelings."* If you are concerned about that person's feelings and needs, then explain your reasons for not changing the behavior again.

- Be sure to file that person's feedback away in your memory for future consideration. Perhaps you don't find the feedback relevant or useful, but you may change your mind if you receive similar perceptions from others.

- If you are unsure about any feedback that you receive, be sure to clarify it with other sources.

Practice Makes Permanent

You must be proactive in creating a feedback atmosphere in your work and home. Seek feedback on an everyday basis, so that it is not out of the ordinary to ask for the perceptions of those around you. Practice makes permanent, and with continued practice you will find seeking and receiving feedback easier to do, welcomed by others, and more rewarding both professionally and personally.

Feedback Checklist

Here is a checklist that you can use to remind you of the important steps whenever you seek feedback from others:

___ Feedback needs to be sought on a regular basis. Exchanging information and perceptions is a process, not a single event.

___ Seek feedback after you have identified your goals. Access others in short, concise sessions.

___ Always seek *specific* feedback. Use the SBI model to accomplish this.

___ Don't make excuses or try to explain your behavior. When receiving feedback, remain calm and be sure to say, *"Thank you."*

___ When receiving feedback be sure to ask for alternative behaviors to improve your performance.

___ Be prepared to paraphrase and summarize any feedback you receive.

___ Be sure to respect individuals who don't wish to give feedback. They may change their minds later, but not if you pester them.

___ Be sure to take the time *after* the feedback interaction to evaluate the information. Use the self-management model of feedback.

___ One of the more important uses of feedback is to teach yourself to recognize situations in which a certain behavior needs to be altered. Feedback can be used to "catch yourself" at times when you are less than optimally effective.

___ Use feedback to clarify goals, to track progress toward those goals, and to improve the effectiveness of your behaviors over a period of time.

Suggested Readings

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Background

The advice given in this guidebook is backed by CCL's research and educational experience, which has over the years demonstrated the value of (1) assessment for development and (2) systematic development.

Assessment for development has been a focus of CCL since its beginning in 1970. That year Robert Dorn, Ph.D., was named

director of the Leadership Development Program (LDP).™ He had come from the Peace Corps, which practiced assessment for selection where trainees were evaluated to determine whether they should receive assignments but were never told what was learned about them.

This was also the long-standing practice of the business world at that time, as reflected in the use of assessment centers to identify potential managers—the first such operational center having been set up by Michigan Bell in 1958.

Dorn had a different idea; he believed that if you tell people how they are doing, this information can help them do better. This simple but powerful notion was built into LDP, which, of course, is a feedback-intensive experience.

It was also understood from the beginning that developing the capacity to lead was not something that could be accomplished by a single, time-limited event. LDP was originally several weeks in length—before practicality dictated that it be condensed into one week. This understanding, shaped by CCL research on how executives learn from experience, and by the effort to follow up with participants of LDP and other CCL programs, has evolved into the recognition that leadership must be developed by means of a continual and systematic process, and that an essential aspect of this process is ongoing feedback.

A thorough explanation of these themes can be found in *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Leadership Development* (Jossey-Bass, 1998), and in such CCL reports as *How to Design an Effective System for Developing Managers and Executives* (1996).

Other Guidebooks

Becoming a More Versatile Learner

On-the-job experiences are crucial for managerial development, and managers learn the most when they approach them with a variety of *learning tactics*. Of the four most commonly used tactics—feeling, action, thinking, and accessing others—people typically employ only one or two, thus limiting their learning and eventually their performance. This guidebook describes the four tactics in detail, giving examples of how they can be used. It also provides information on how to identify preferred tactics and how to develop nonpreferred ones.

Reaching Your Development Goals

After a formal feedback experience, such as a management development program, performance review, or 360-degree instrument, individuals are often enthusiastic about pursuing their development goals but then hesitate because they don't know where to begin. This guidebook shows three strategies that are necessary in any intentional effort to grow: seek challenging assignments, seek training for targeted skills, and seek developmental relationships. Practical advice is given on how to choose the right assignments, identify specific skills that need improving, and establish relationships that will provide ongoing support and encouragement.

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FOR THE PRACTICING MANAGER

Ongoing Feedback: How to Get It, How to Use It

Information on your performance from co-workers and colleagues is essential if you are to develop new management skills and hone existing ones. This guidebook provides a method of assessing that information and a study tool for this feedback.

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